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ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

MR. SHERIFF GORDON

AT THE CEREMONY OF HIS INSTALLATION

AS

THE LORD RECTOR

OF

MARISCHAL COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY,

ABERDEEN,

ON FRIDAY, 23^d MARCH, 1849.

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A D D R E S S.

GENTLEMEN,—Many things—the novelty of my position—the dignity of this ancient and constitutional academical office—the unmerited compliment and graceful surprise in conferring it—the venerable renown of this famous resort and seat of all humanizing studies—the learning and intelligence of the masters and the disciples around me—the approving presence of civic authority—the mere confluence and throng of people assembled in this large hall—the illustrious line of my predecessors in this chair—the very admiration and affection with which I regard an honourable rival—whose ensigns were lowered, without tarnish, in a well-fought, not an acrimonious field—and the consciousness of all—except feeling—which is wanting in me—so many things combine to agitate and depress me with the fear that I shall only, with most feeble and imperfect words, acknowledge the heavy obligation for which I am your debtor. These are embarrassments which might more or less sharply assail anybody whom your suffrages had raised to this eminence. But there is one thing besides, in my own case, which, as I venture to address you, strikes me with peculiar emotion. I was, but I am not a stranger in Aberdeen. I need no pilot through its streets. There are faces in

this room familiar and dear to my eye. Yesterday, and to-day, I have been congratulated by voices which recalled the earnestness of busy courts and the hilarity of merry hearths. Yesterday, and to-day, I have returned the pressure of hands, which long before that, had grasped mine as hands are grasped by men who mean to seal the marriage of their souls. And, therefore, the feelings of my gratitude, which are stirring my whole heart with a satisfaction I take no pains to repress, and swelling it with a pride in which I am not ashamed to exult, unite themselves by an unbidden impulse to pleasant recollections of my life already rooted upon this side of the Dee. For I cannot forget that the brilliant honours with which your generous kindness now invests me are not the earliest ties linking me with your great city. Exactly two years ago, the welcome which it gave me cheered me on in the performance of new and arduous duties. The term of my connection with Aberdeenshire as its Sheriff was very short ; but clear and sunny for ever shall be the retrospect to me of those months, throughout the whole of which all sorts of men—I remember no exception—made official cordiality undistinguishable from private friendship. Is it, then, an arrogant fancy in me to bridge the past and the present ? or, is it a justifiable hope to which I would fondly yield, that in my public conduct since I left you as a magistrate, there has been nothing either to disgrace promises originally given, and the experience first acquired in this noble county, or to wither the goodwill, and, let me boldly say it, the popular confidence which here made my labour easy, and my leisure delightful.

I tremble to submit to the self-scrutiny which may explain to what—unless to an indulgent partiality on your part—it can be that I owe the proud triumphs of this hour. But, first of all, let me rejoice to know, what I have learned everywhere, that the distinguished man whom victory on this occasion forsook—succumbed to the vicissitudes of an open, high-spirited, and unenvenomed contest. It was a battle, I imagine, which might have exhibited the chivalry of Homeric warriors—who sometimes prefaced the struggle of death by the colloquial barter of family pedigrees and family gossip. I shall invert the courtesy, and now, when the fight is done, briefly allude to my opponent. In your presence, who have seen, and heard, and been charmed by him, it is unnecessary to mention some prominent qualities and conspicuous attainments by which he is marked. I shall always gladly support the axiom, that the wittiest men are the most sensible men. With the same glance they see the drama as it goes on before the curtain and behind the scenes. At present I wish merely to say that Lord Robertson, as a legal adviser, was singularly discreet, practical, and just. Nobody at the bar was ever more invariably and perfectly fair and straightforward. He was an advocate without cunning, or trick, or littleness, seeking and taking no advantages which a strong mind, bending its energies to its work, may not honestly in that work find and employ for dexterous argument or persuasive pleading. With an inviolable fidelity, too, he observed every arrangement which might be made with him in the course of a suit. There was implicit reliance, absolute safety in his promise. All this was visible enough in broad day-light. It may be less known

how he has exerted both his talents and his good humour to prevent and arrest the perilous voyages of litigation. Adding this to what you know of the warmth of his heart, the capacity of his mind, and the resources of his knowledge, you will not dissent from me in thinking that the reputation of Lord Robertson is honourable to himself, to his profession, and to his country.

It would be a paltry affectation to deny that I directly associate a part of your favour with the humble but willing testimony which I have lately been permitted to offer regarding the inestimable advantages, and, indeed, imperious necessity of the general diffusion of education and knowledge. That cause is the ocean to which the rivers of men's thoughts, gushing from a hundred different troubled fountains, are hurrying with impetuous velocity. It is not any longer the mere dream or aspiration of philosophical philanthropy. Political convulsions—municipal tumult—social disquiet and confusion—the discipline and the over-crowding of prisons—the swelling deluge of poor's rates—sleek political economy, at comfortable firesides, unravelling its Gordian knot by the uncertain analysis of experimental legislation—ragged and shivering childhood in the streets cutting its Gordian knot with the swift knife of urgent want or temptation—the overwhelming experience of judges—and the startled perplexity of statesmen, are all invoking the same universal remedy—the education of the whole people. The theatre of nations has seen no such spectacle till now.

Consider how very little variety there is in all that is recorded on this topic by history, from its earliest to its latest pages—from Herodotus to Macaulay. “How much do I

wish," exclaimed Montaigne ; " how much do I wish that, while I live, either some other, or Justus Lipsius, the most learned man now living, of a most polite and judicious understanding, had both the will, and health, and leisure sufficient, sincerely to collect into a register, according to their divisions and classes, as many as are to be found of the opinions of the ancient philosophers, about the subject of our being and manners, their controversies, the succession and reputation of sects ; with the application of the lives of the authors and their disciples to their own precepts in memorable accidents, and upon exemplary occasions. What a beautiful and useful work that would be !" The substance of the wish of the vivacious and erudite Frenchman may be paraphrased into a congratulation by ourselves. How happy are we that, while we live, no other but Mr. Macaulay, with his prodigious and accurate learning, of a most polite and judicious understanding, has had will, and health, and leisure, not merely sincerely to classify and digest the opinions of other people, but likewise in language more lively and pictorial than the pencil and colour of the Mexican annalists to embody for us, and all time, his own enlarged and well-balanced survey of the constitution and the people of Britain, their manners and their controversies, the succession and reputation of governments and parties ; with the applications of the lives of public men and their disciples to their own precepts in memorable accidents and upon exemplary occasions. What a beautiful and useful work it is !—

*Magnanimosque duces, totiusque ordine gentis
Mores, et studia, et populos, et prælia dicit.*

I trust that at Glasgow, on Wednesday, there may have been

a youthful hearer who listened to the eloquence of the great Englishman as, two thousand years ago, at Olympia, young Thucydides listened to the grand old Dorian. For both historians have told us what befalls the tyrants who seek to lay contemptuous hands upon

The ark

Of that magnificent and awful cause—

the liberty at once of the mind and the body of man.

You can easily, I dare say, call up the figure of the “Father of profane history,” as he stood of old in Memphis which was girdled by the sacred stream, and by the huge embankment, itself a marvel, of the marvellous Nile. The serene and speckless azure of the Egyptian sky was above him—while far and near shone on every side the lustrous hues of the wondrous masonry—the sanctuaries and images of the gods—the palaces of kings and the tombs of dynasties—the simplicity of the colossal monolith—the majestic composure of the Sphynx. At the base of the stupendous columns was the Greek, of credulous ear, but incisive intellect, meditating the mysteries as they fell from the lips of the luxurious priests of Vulcan in their raiments of fresh linen, and their shoes of byblus. What a contrast and what a lesson are suggested by the scene! All that was merely material—made of the earth by human hands—which the whirling dust of the desert might sooner or later bury in oblivion—which the noiseless and ceaseless pressure of time might one day crumble down—in which the primal seed of decay was already germinating its annihilating force—all this was clear, massive, tangible, and intelligible, steady on its broad foundations, distinct in its exquisite outline,

perfect in its symmetrical structure ; while all that was properly immaterial—concerning the nobler and better part of man—relating to the inner spirit and imperishable soul—was dark, hollow, allegorical, and impalpable—a shadow—a picture—

Or little else but dreams,
Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm,

except, and the exception is curious—except to the initiated. —And where are the initiated, or where is what they knew ? The temple and the mystery, the hierophant and the adept, are one and all gone into dust and silence. The whole scrolls put together, which we have plucked from dead men's fingers—the concentrated illumination of every fitful spark of meaning, which we believe ourselves to have elicited from the obscurity of hieroglyphics—do not afford us a millionth-part of the insight into the system, the character, the life of a gigantic empire, and a teeming population, which we may gather from the narration, the hints, and the insinuations of the ancient traveller from Halicarnassus. It appears to me that Herodotus unconsciously discloses why such greatness has terminated in such nothingness. “In Egypt,” he says, “they have two sorts of letters, one of which is called sacred, the other common.” Not signifying, however, by these words, that the sacred sort was confined to heavenly things, and the common sort to mundane things—but that in one sort, the sacred, all knowledge was expressed and preserved ; while in the other, the common sort, knowledge did not deign to give itself an utterance. It is a fearfully instructive myth. One sort of letters they gilded and cherished—another sort of letters they scorned

and neglected. The arrogant chronicles of their pride were inscribed on the dead walls of stone. They did not write a syllable in a common tongue upon the living minds, and hearts, and sympathies of a mighty people. And so the memory of the haughty and the graves of the lowly have passed away for ever together. We are beginning—it is late, but it is yet in time—to comprehend both that for all men among us there shall be but one sort of letters, and that the common—and also, that to all men these letters shall be taught frankly, fearlessly, and fully. The Greeks and the Romans require a very different criticism. Their literature is a perpetual and beneficent glory, which has diffused and will send its radiance and its heat to the uttermost limits of the peopled world. As the moon sways the waters of the ocean, so their mental and intellectual victories and trophies shall probably continue to influence the communities of civilized men, until the great globe itself, and all which it inherit, sink into

The unfathomable gulf, where all is still.

But even among them, while the fabrics of their commonwealths (but that a great deal more than their social usages) seemed to allow unfettered room for the development and play of the faculties of the soul, there towered from earth to heaven an insuperable barrier against the universal diffusion and possession of education. The contemplation of the impervious screen which thus inevitably excluded knowledge from particular classes, in earlier ages, becomes more darkly impressive, as I reluctantly am obliged to confess that its baneful gloom clouds a vast country in our own time. I affirm that slavery, and the education of a whole

people, are radically and utterly incompatible. The poles are not farther asunder than these antagonistical conditions coexistent, each in its proper and complete vigour, at the same place. It will be an impotent blow against the general proposition which I have stated, to remind me that, at Athens or at Rome, at Corinth or at Capua, there were notoriously hundreds of slaves, whose acquirements were equal and often superior to those of their masters. The example carries with it another moral. The better luck, or the skill, or perhaps the merit, of a few, was too rare and imperceptible, even in its aggregate, to affect the immense family of bondsmen. The master was never induced, by the display of extraordinary and serviceable capabilities in one of his household, to weigh the probable consequences of lifting all the rest to a higher platform of knowledge and intelligence. He thanked Jupiter for the good gifts he had sent him in Davus, whose talents and accomplishments had extricated his affairs from ruin, and, the next minute, lashed Dromo, till his arm could lash no more, for forgetting the sauce for the turbot. The successive warnings and tremendous jeopardies of a servile war never, so far as I can recollect, convoked the senate, when the danger was over, to deliberate on the justice or the expediency of modifying slavery or educating the slave. Only, let it be remembered, that sometimes, there and then, when servitude was inherent and ineradicable in the body politic, did its victim, with the iron on his limb, and the brand in his flesh, discover that he might hide the one and relax the other, and more nearly approach the portal of liberty, by becoming a well-educated man. So far back as this was the light struggling through darkness — the mind vindicating its

chainless freedom from the trammels which enthralled the body.

Divine Truth came down and walked with men, saying, "Love thy neighbour as thyself." And when the beautiful and cheering commandment of unrestricted charity and love from man to man, on which, with the love of God, hang all the law and the prophets, was sent forth, as if on angelic wings, by our Lord, to be acknowledged, adopted, and practised, the roseate tints of the morning of a purer day, from that moment, streaked the horizon of the ultimate dignity and happiness of mankind. It may be a long and weary while before we fulfil the incontrovertible justice of that meek morality. Ages have rolled over ages of bloodshed and oppression, of bigotry and cruelty, without humbling us into obedience of the heavenly injunction. Ages have rolled over ages, in which have emerged such momentous means as the compass and the printing press, for fusing all races into the sympathies of a common brotherhood, without attuning us to the wisdom of the heavenly benevolence. I need not tell you, however, with what rapid strides the conviction of the folly of war, and of the blessedness of peace has been lately storming the strongholds of feeling and reason. To drop entirely the sharp arbitrament of the sword is an idle and impracticable vision. But to abate the necessity—to lessen the occasions—to curb the appetite for war—so to fight as to justify the thunders of the cannon as the dreadful chastisement brought down by the ravages of lawless ambition, and to consecrate the battle-field as the last solemn appeal against the outrages of wanton aggression, this is a glorious duty, and a worthy task for those who, by their fortunate destiny, live, as we

do, in the meridian splendour of Christian civilization. And there can be nothing which shall more speedily, surely, and safely lead to “a consummation devoutly to be wished” than the earnest and faithful accomplishment of a scheme which, for the first time, I repeat it, since history was written, is now demanded with one accordant cry, by the governing not less than by the governed—the thorough education of the whole people.

You see, then, that I regard you as labourers preparing for no ordinary work.

Et quasi cursores vitæ lampada tradunt.

Generation speeds the torch to generation. In your hands, I am sure, the holy flame will not expire. Believe me, that, unless all the omens about us are false, he who runs with it in the course of the next twenty or thirty years should be girt to carry the lamp of knowledge into yet untrodden paths and up untried ascents. Be it your object to make a distant posterity speak of your time as a traditional era in the story of the improvement of man. For why are we to be without our traditions? Tradition is not surely necessarily the offspring of barbarism and gloom—of inaccessible forests and pestilential caves—of triple-bodied giants and hundred-headed hydras. On the contrary, useful arts and inventions—ennobling institutions and customs—agreeable and invigorating pastimes, are all interwoven with traditions. There are traditions about the gift of fire, the use of the plough, the growing of corn, the stringing of the lyre, the Olympic games, the Corinthian pillar, and the introduction of letters. It would be a proud achievement to send down the stream of History the tradition that in your

days, and not without your helping hands, was built up, between the cradle and the prison, between juvenile ignorance and precocious crime, that great burning wall of early education which did more to cleanse the land from perilous stuff, to increase social virtue, and to stimulate honest industry than the restraints and hardships of penal codes, the unspeakable horrors of Norfolk island, or the ignominy and the doom of the halter and the scaffold. And I trust that there may not be forgotten, as one of the earliest builders, the name of my esteemed friend and former colleague—William Watson.

I candidly acknowledge, that I cannot bring myself to assume here the stern accents of a Mentor. I feel as if I should be more apt to participate in the fervour, than able authoritatively to direct the current, of your pursuits. Gladly do I assume that, not from calculations of temporary policy or profit, but from the inward faith in the propriety of such a course, flowing alike from a sustaining spirit of self-respect, and from a rebuking consciousness of being

As ever in the great Taskmaster's eye,

you are determined to be active, diligent, and honourable men. Take my word for it, this is not a season for apathy or carelessness. The hydraulic press of public opinion never wrung out of men, whatever real worth is in them more thoroughly than it is doing now. Great names and great riches may be powerful friends at starting, but they have been rendered powerless to shield indolence or to buy impunity. The basis, prop, and seal of success, are in the merit, assiduity, and zeal of each individual himself. The laziness or the energy of each fulfils for him the periodical

functions of the Latin censor, consigning to obscurity, or lifting to honour. Nor must we do what we have to do with slovenly incompleteness. There is a comfort and almost a glow of physical pleasure in the assurance of duty being well performed, which compensates for the toil of unrestful days—the bitterness of sleepless nights. Above all, imbue all your actions with integrity, candour, and with the gentle courtesies and magnanimity of Christian charity. They are the proper attributes of the great and the good, in all vocations, and under all trials ; but pre-eminently and gracefully do they belong to those of whom I must see many before me—who, while they live, are to be the ministers and teachers of the message of those glad tidings whose pacific but irresistible effulgence shall subdue wider dominions than any over which flashed the conquering scimitar of the Koran—whose genial mercies shall penetrate profounder shades than the oak-groves haunted by the dismal sacrifices of Druids—and whose harmonious hymns of thanksgiving shall be heard on sublimer heights than ever echoed the idolatrous orgies of Baal.

Gentlemen, I have done. I shall not blame the distractions of anxious duties for crude thoughts and halting phrases. With an unbounded leisure I could not fitly shape my thanks. The trust which you have given to me, I shall keep proudly and jealously, for the protection of your interests, and for the promotion of the welfare of this august university. For yourselves, I can only sincerely wish the acquisition of everything, which unbroken health, a prosperous career, and a cloudless conscience can bestow. Let the motto on the banners of your lives be Patience, Vigilance, Energy, and then Victory. And, ere I reluctantly

pronounce the word "Farewell," take from me, if it can avail you, the homely, but the hearty prayer, that the blessing of God may so follow your footsteps, as to make each of you the pride of his father's house, and the joy of his mother's heart.